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SUBJECT: INTERNATIONAL WOMEN OF COURAGE AWARD: REKHA MISHRA  
AND SUSHREE ASHAMMA

REF: SECSTATE 126072

¶1. (U) SUMMARY: Per reftel, please find Embassy,s nominations for the Secretary of State,s Award for International Women of Courage. In a country of over a billion people, India is home to dozens of worthy candidates who are extraordinary leaders in furthering justice and equality. This year Embassy New Delhi would again like to nominate two women (one representing the northern region and one representing the southern region) who have demonstrated remarkable courage in challenging exploitative social practices in India: Dr. Rekha Mishra and Sushree Ashamma. End Summary.

Dr. Rekha Mishra Crusades Against Female Feticide  
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¶2. (U) Ultrasound screening and pre-natal sex determination with the intention of aborting female fetuses is one of the most socially abhorrent and prevalent forms of violence against girls in India. With a strong cultural bias towards boys to carry on the family name and to avoid dowry expenses, many families have opted to abort their female fetuses. As a result, north Indian states and cities are facing dramatically skewed gender ratios, lending to an increase in other societal ills, including trafficking in women and girls. After Punjab, which has the worst gender ratio in India, Haryana is number two, with a gender ratio of 861 females to 1000 males.

¶3. (U) In 1994 and 2001, India passed two laws, the Prenatal Sex Determination Act and the Pre-Conception and Prenatal Diagnostic Tests Act to stop the practice of female feticide subsequent to ultrasound screenings determining the gender of the child. The law unequivocally, prohibits doctors from sharing the gender of the fetus with the expecting parents. Unfortunately, due to apathetic attitudes and the magnitude of the problem, the government has not been able to enforce the act or control the practice.

¶4. (U) "The attitude is 'let the neighbors have girls, I will have a boy'," says Dr. Rekha Mishra, a medical officer in the north Indian state of Haryana. In her efforts to implement the existing legislation, Mishra has sought to hold accountable unscrupulous medical practitioners -- many of whom are her medical colleagues -- who carry out the highly profitable, but unethical business of abortions based on sex. In 2001, Mishra supervised the raid of a clinic which led to the first conviction under these two laws. Despite solid evidence, it took nearly five years of legal battles to secure a conviction. During those five years, Mishra faced significant financial and personal safety challenges. She

struggled with retaining a prosecutor and significant pressure from fellow medical colleagues and politicians to drop the case. Nevertheless, she persevered. While Mishra hopes increasing accountability of medical professionals will have a significant impact on pre-natal sex selection, she knows that it will be a challenge. With steadfast advocates, like Mishra willing to challenge the government, society, her colleagues, and the odds, little girls in India just might have hope.

#### Sushree Ashamma Fights Against Sexual Slavery

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15. (U) Sushree Ashamma was born around 40 years ago in a small village in Andhra Pradesh and is the daughter of poor agricultural laborers. Her parents had no son, so they agreed to her grandfather's proposal to dedicate their only daughter to a temple goddess under the Jogini system as a way of securing her as their life-long provider. The custom results in young girls becoming sexual slaves. Once a Jogini, a girl may be given to one man or she may be considered common sexual property and be obliged to accept the advances of any man who wants her. Joginis live in a segregated part of the village, cut off from the rest of the community. They also suffer poor health and face a high risk of catching sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV and AIDS, and there is a high risk that their daughters will be made Joginis as well. Typically, Joginis are the most marginalized and dispossessed group in their communities.

16. (U) At the age of nine, Ashamma became a Jogini. "From that moment," she recounted, "I did not live with dignity. I became available for all the men of Karni village. They would ask me for sexual favors, and I, as a Jogini, was

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expected to please them.<sup>8</sup> Since the age of 11, she was forced to sleep with countless men, including many much older than herself. When the Andhra Pradesh Mahila Samathya Society (APMSS) started their program of sanghas or self-help groups in Karni, Ashamma joined enthusiastically. She quickly rose, becoming head of the group in 1997 and resolved to fight the practice of Jogini. Neither the police nor other villagers were initially prepared to help her. On one occasion she sat in protest until she succeeded in preventing the initiation ceremony for a nine-year-old girl.

17. (U) In recent years, she has worked tirelessly for the APMSS women's movement, traveling around the local villages with like-minded Jogins to help women organize and stop initiations. As a Jogini I faced many difficulties so I am determined that no women should be made a Jogini. In 2001 she received a national prize, the Neeraj Bhano Award, for her campaigning work. The prize was Rs. 150,000 (USD 3750). Apart from Rs. 50,000 (USD 1250) which she put in trust for her daughter, she gave the rest back to APMSS to continue to campaign to end Jogini. Despite this award, she lives in poverty, earning a mere Rs. 20 (fifty U.S. cents) a day. According to locals, the number of girls being forced to be Joginis has declined substantially because of Ashamma's efforts. She has done so despite hostility from many villagers, especially men. She continues her work, in the field proclaiming that she "will fight relentlessly and peacefully to solve the problems of Jogini."

18. (U) Comments: Many obstacles to the realization of women's human rights in India still persist. Many are social and cultural in nature, deeply rooted in the traditions of local communities. Both Dr. Rekha Mishra and Sushree Ashamma are working diligently in their communities to challenge these local norms. Neither woman is particularly well known in India. Post believes that the Secretary's award would do much to raise the profile of these women and their work in India.

¶9. (U) We would be happy to facilitate contact for Department officials with Dr. Rekha Mishra or Sushree Ashamma. Post officer responsible for following women,s issues is Political Officer, Reva Gupta (guptar3@state.gov).  
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